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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS SEEKS WAYS TO INCREASE NIGERIAN
RESPONSE CAPABILITY TO OIL SPILLS

11. (SBU) Summary: At a round table discussion in Lagos on February 18, Nigerian Environmental NGOs and visiting Science Fellow and Environmental Protection Agency Federal On-Scene Coordinator, Michael Solecki, identified weaknesses in the Nigerian oil spill response mechanisms and discussed ways NGOs could improve Nigerian spill clean-up capability. It was agreed that the response procedures practiced in the United States are not immediately applicable in the Nigerian environment but that NGOs can play a role in increasing the overall efficacy of oil-spill response. The NGOs also agreed that they could do more to raise public awareness of the health consequences of oil spills and the negative impact on the economy of environmental degradation. The NGOS expressed interest in meeting again to explore the possibility of joint initiatives. End Summary.

Integrated Responses to Spills Essential

12. (U) Michael Solecki, Federal On-Scene Coordinator for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and visiting Science Fellow, spoke in Lagos on February 18 to representatives from five Nigerian environmental NGOs about U.S. oil-spill response techniques. Solecki outlined US procedures, stressing the centralized information system and integrated approach used in the United States for responding to all kinds of incidents from terrorist attacks to hurricanes. Solecki noted that in the United States there is a single telephone number to which environmental incidents are reported and that all information regarding an incident is collected at a central point to which all involved have access to the latest information on an equal basis. Solecki stressed that everyone from environmental groups to international oil companies, from wildlife protection societies to government agencies and local political officials are integrated into the U.S. response procedures. For emergency response purposes the United States is divided into ten regions and the regions help each other when confronted with problems beyond their capacity.

Obstacles to Integrated Response

13. (SBU) The assembled environmental activists agreed that a number of obstacles stood in the way of Nigeria developing similar response procedures for environmental incidents. Communities, particularly those in the Niger Delta that are the principal victims of repeated oil spills have, they said, a very deep-seated mistrust of both the Nigerian government and the international oil companies (IOCs). This is manifested in a reluctance to work with government agencies and in hostility toward the IOCs, often including violence or mass protests. According to Olawale Akinwumi of the NGO The Environment there is a widespread perception that the Nigerian Federal Government is in collusion with the IOCs.

14. (SBU) Professor Emmanuel Obot of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation pointed out that at the Local Government Area level there is no representative of the Ministry of the Environment present. When spills occur, he said, communities turn immediately to whichever IOC they hold responsible. The response of the IOCs, he continued, often leaves a great deal to be desired. He cited an incident in his home community of Eket where ExxonMobil took no action for over two days despite his repeated requests to responsible officials of the IOC. He resorted to calling the then governor of Cross River State, Donald Duke, to report that the spill had occurred and, if unchecked, would soon reach Cross River State; after this call it took only hours for ExxonMobil to respond with clean-up crews. (Note: Eket is located in Akwa Ibom State, not Cross River; when asked why he did not contact his own governor, Professor Obot replied: "I don't waste my time.")

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End Note.) Ifaedi Chifrem of the NGO The Green Group showed pictures of an oil spill clean-up in which the locally hired workers had no protective clothing; raising the question whether the IOC had failed to provide the protective clothing or the LGA had pocketed the money provided by the IOC for such clothing.

15. (SBU) Joel Bisina of the NGO Niger Delta Professionals for Development described the current situation as one in which the Federal Government fails to enforce environmental regulations, the IOCs blame spills on sabotage, and the youths of affected communities use every spill "as an opportunity to make money" and to do so prevent both the government and IOC clean-up crews from coming in until they pay. Until people have faith in the sincerity of the Nigerian government to protect their interests, Bisina said, people will continue to try to deal directly with the IOCs and make as much money as they can out of the situation. He added that the Nigerian government is good at creating agencies but poor at giving them competence and funding.

Lobbying, Training and Awareness Campaigns

16. (SBU) Solecki outlined the recommendations he plans to make to the Nigerian National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) to improve its response capability, but the NGO representatives determined that they could not wait for NOSDRA to re-organize or the Ministry of the Environment to provide funding. Together, the NGOs identified seven actions which NGOs could take to help address the situation, including: 1) lobby for public access to draft environmental legislation and greater transparency of current regulations; 2) lobby for standardized valuations for environmental damage; 3) create local watch groups to report spills; 4) educate youth groups, possibly using existing youth organizations such as the Youth Corps or the Red Cross, about the severe health hazards and impact of oil spills; 5) train and mobilize youths in simple, cheap techniques for cleaning up old spills; 6) train youths as "first responders" for environmental incidents; and 7) launch a media campaign to education the public about the negative impact on health and the economy of environmental degradation caused by oil

spills, gas flaring and climate change.

¶7. (U) Solecki suggested that Nigerians needed to take more personal responsibility for their environment, starting with picking up and sorting their own waste. The activists agreed.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The environmentalists present at the meeting shared a broad consensus on both the problems and the solutions to the current situation with respect to incident response. There was widespread skepticism about the ability of the Ministry of the Environment to take the necessary corrective actions as outlined by Solecki, particularly in light of the tiny budget allocated to the Ministry of the Environment which, according to Professor Obot, is less than half of one per cent of the total budget. The environmentalists present agreed that the meeting had been productive and that it would be beneficial to meet again to explore ways of concrete cooperation with respect to the seven actions listed above. End Comment.

¶9. (U) This cable was cleared by Embassy Abuja.
BLAIR